

human appeal. Now the names of Li Po and Po Chü-i and T'ao Yuan-ming are rapidly becoming as familiar as those of Hafiz or Sadi or Omar Khayyam. But Tu Fu, the greatest of all in the estimation of his countrymen, has remained comparatively unknown to us owing to the lack of a translator with sufficient courage to attack the undoubted difficulties of his verse. He lived through one of the most disastrous periods of Chinese history—the terrible rebellion of An Lu-shan, which broke out in A.D. 755 and laid waste the most flourishing provinces of the Empire. The scenes of desolation which the poet witnessed at that time, and the sufferings which he and his family had to endure, left an indelible mark on his mind.

If ever a poet laid bare the secrets of his heart, it was Tu Fu. His poems are poured forth on every occasion, chronicling all the hopes and fears and varying moods that elevate or depress his sensitive spirit. Even the allusiveness of his style cannot disguise the essential candour and simplicity of the man, and Mrs. Ayscough is right in regarding his poems as constituting a veritable autobiography. There can be few such records of a poet's life. Wordsworth gave us something of the sort in his "Prelude," but that was a retrospect tinged with a sentimental haze, whereas Tu Fu has composed a sort of intimate poetical diary recording the thoughts and emotions evoked from day to day by the most trivial incidents as well as the most momentous events. Nothing is too homely for his muse: he does not think of poetry as something aloof and sublime to be employed only on great romantic themes, but as a golden thread closely interwoven in the texture of human life. It is this sympathetic human quality which invests his writings with such charm, even when they are read in a translation.

Many other qualities, of course, are lost. We miss the rhythm, the tonal effects, the masterly conciseness, the exquisite diction. Even the rhyme has had to go—and perhaps it is better sacrificed. Generally speaking a semi-rhythmical prose forms a more satisfactory medium for translated Chinese poetry than the rather artificial verse—renderings which used to be in fashion. But Mrs. Ayscough is sometimes seized with a strange passion for terseness which results in passages like this:

Not sleeping, fancy hear gold keys in locks;
Because wind, think of jade bridle-ornaments.

This is literalism run mad. Because the Chinese use no articles and few prepositions, it does not follow that the practice is permissible in English. It may seriously obscure the sense, or border on the grotesque.

"Drinking ended, this person is without return to place." Here one can see no reason at all for avoiding the obvious rendering: "has nowhere to go." Still less defensible is this staccato style of translation when applied to a piece of prose commentary: "Hsuan Tsung latter years, supply of soldiers exhausted; conscription of men to guard frontiers, incessant; provinces harassed," etc. That reminds one of nothing so much as Mr. Alfred Jingle.